



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Detention of RFE/RL Journalists in Turkmenistan

As delivered by Ambassador Julie Finley
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
March 23, 2006

Mr. Chairman, the United States is concerned about recent actions of the authorities of Turkmenistan to stamp out any remaining element of independent international press in the country. On March 7th, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) correspondents Meret Khommadov and Jumadurdy Ovezov were charged with disruptive behavior following a meeting of elders in Mary province. Authorities prevented the journalists from contacting Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty about their welfare or whereabouts for more than a week.

The two journalists each received a sentence of 15 days of public or community work and have since been released. However, one condition of their release was their signing a statement that they would no longer provide reports to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Even before these arrests, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty faced difficulties operating in Turkmenistan. We have learned that RFE/RL correspondents throughout the country have lost phone service, making it extremely difficult for them to file their reports. RFE/RL reporters have been harassed and beaten in the past, prompting them to flee the country.

Mr. Chairman, this is not how a free and independent press operates. Intimidation of journalists, including detention without due process, preventing objective reporting, and hindering access to independent news sources, only proves Turkmenistan's lack of commitment to upholding its Helsinki obligations with respect to human rights and the freedom of the media. The United States calls on the Government of Turkmenistan to take steps to introduce the safe and unhindered operation of an independent, international press in Turkmenistan.

Thank you.